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Everyone's at Risk From Ozone Pollution

(Salt Lake City, Utah) — Ozone, the main ingredient of summertime smog, is not just harmful to the elderly, children and those with respiratory conditions. Everyone is at risk for health problems from exposure to ozone. And there are easy, convenient choices Utahns can make to protect their health and the environment from ozone's damaging effects, according to the Utah Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Salt Lake Valley Health Department (SLVHD) and Utah Department of Health (DOH).

According to SLVHD, one in three Utahns experiences some respiratory problems when ozone levels are high. Moreover, studies show that, over time, exposure to low levels of ozone can reduce a healthy adult's lung function by 15 to 20 percent, making it more difficult to breathe as deeply and as vigorously as usual. It's even harder on children.

"We are concerned about ozone because lung damage can occur for most people without any noticeable signs," said Dr. Dagmar Vitek, medical services director at the Salt Lake Valley Health Department. "No one is immune."

Ozone can irritate the respiratory system, causing coughing, throat irritation and/or an uncomfortable sensation in the chest. It can lower an individual's resistance to diseases such as colds and pneumonia. Those who are most sensitive to its impacts are the very young, the elderly

and those with pre-existing breathing problems. People with respiratory diseases whose lungs are more vulnerable to ozone may experience health effects earlier and at lower ozone levels than less sensitive individuals. Ozone also makes people more sensitive to allergens, the most common triggers of asthma attacks. Even healthy adults doing heavy exercise or manual labor outdoors may experience unhealthy effects during high ozone periods. This is because, during physical activity, ozone penetrates deeper into the parts of the lungs that are more vulnerable to injury.

Studies have shown that ozone can inflame and damage the lining of the lungs. Within a few days, the damaged cells are shed and replaced — much like the skin peels after a sunburn. However, if this type of inflammation happens repeatedly over a long time period, lung tissue may become permanently scarred, resulting in less lung elasticity, permanent loss of lung function and a lower quality of life.

According to DEQ, reducing the pollution that forms ozone and protecting yourself from the harmful effects of ozone are critical. There are many easy, convenient choices that make a difference. The one choice that makes the biggest difference is driving less or not at all on polluted days, because emissions from cars and trucks cause over 50 percent of the air pollution along the Wasatch Front.

By simply parking your vehicle for one day, the average driver would keep just over one-fourth pound of pollution out of the air. While that may not seem like much, if every driver along the Wasatch Front would park his/her vehicle for one day per week, emissions would decrease by 125 tons that week.

Reducing or eliminating the number of short trips you take is another good choice.

“Simply starting your car and pulling out of your driveway causes nearly as much air pollution as commuting many miles to work,” said Rick Sprott, director of the Utah Division of Air Quality. “That’s because a vehicle emits a lot of pollution during the first few minutes of operation,

before emission controls have warmed up and reached peak efficiency. Combining errands cuts smog because the engine systems stay warm.”

According to a 2004 survey of Wasatch Front drivers by the Division of Air Quality and a University of Utah communication research class, drivers reported that about one-third of their car trips were short trips less than five minutes long. Respondents also started their cars an average of four times the previous day.

“You could walk instead of drive for some of those short trips and consolidate the others,” Sprott said. “You walk because it’s good for your heart and lungs. It just makes sense to make the same choice for clean air.”

Vitek agrees. “Walking helps to decrease the amount of vehicle emissions that form ozone, and is also good for preventing obesity and other chronic diseases.”

Regular walking can result in a 30-to-40 percent reduction in the risk of heart disease, a 50 percent reduction in the incidence of diabetes, a 20 percent reduction in the risk of stroke and a 50 percent reduction in the risk of premature death, according to the Utah Department of Health Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program. For more information about walking in Utah, visit www.UtahWalks.org. To start a walking program and earn incentives, log on to www.health.utah.gov/stepitup.

Other good choices include carpooling, using mass transit, conserving energy, postponing errands, avoiding gasoline-powered engines, keeping a vehicle well maintained, obeying the speed limit, avoiding drive-through lanes, choosing a route to avoid traffic delays, waiting to gas up until evening hours and using a non-charcoal barbecue. More ideas are available on the Web at www.cleanair.utah.gov.

Utahns must also protect themselves from exposure to ozone by taking simple precautions even when they don’t feel obvious symptoms. Ozone concentrations are at their highest between 2

and 8 p.m. During this time, Utahns may need to adjust their daily activities. For example, exercise in the morning or later in the evening, when pollution levels are usually lower; spend less time participating in vigorous outdoor activities; take it a little easier when you're outside and don't overexert yourself; limit children's prolonged, strenuous outdoor activity; pay attention to your respiratory system such as coughing, wheezing and discomfort when you take a deep breath. If you have questions or concerns, contact your health care provider.

Utah has a new online air quality tool called the "Utah Air Quality Index." Shaped like a speedometer, it shows the level of ozone every hour in Utah's four urban counties in categories from healthy to hazardous. The index is accessible through the www.cleanair.utah.gov Web site.

"This new tool makes it easier for people to decide which actions they are going to take each day to protect themselves and the environment from ozone," Sprott said.

During the summer ozone season, which runs from June 1 through Sept. 30, DEQ will call voluntary no-drive days and issue health advisories when pollution levels are expected to increase to unhealthful levels. No-drive days and health advisories are posted online, recorded on the hotline and announced by the news media.

In addition to the Web for the latest air pollution information, Utahns may call the Air Pollution Hotline at 801-975-4009 in Salt Lake and Davis counties or 1-800-228-5434 in Utah and Weber counties. Information on air quality is updated at least twice a day — once in the morning and again in the afternoon.

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